

“Breathing Under Water: Introduction”  
Luke 5:27-32

What is the ideal life? What makes us truly happy? How do we find fulfillment? I guess the answer to this depends on one’s perspective. There are many answers to this question and our culture is always luring us to believe its answers. We’ll take a look at one of these popular answers from the movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*. This is the story of a young woman who gets a temporary assignment working for a fashion magazine executive who has made it big in that world. What the young woman discovers in her search for fulfillment and career opportunity is that the illusion of success and power don’t really make us happy:

<https://youtu.be/-qdHE9-8spU>

The line by the executive “Everyone wants to be us” is a powerful one because it is at the heart of such illusions in life. We look on the outside of what people are doing and think to ourselves that this is what life is all about. In his book *Addiction and Grace*, Gerald May writes that (screen), “In our culture, the three gods we do trust for security are possessions, power, and human relationships. To a greater or lesser extent, all of us worship this false trinity.” Being a Christian does not exempt us from such struggles. In fact, as Richard Rohr wisely puts it in his book *Breathing Under Water*, “It is my experience that after over forty years as a priest that we could say the same about many well-intentioned Christians and clergy. Their religion has never touched them or healed them at the unconscious level where all of the real motivation, hurts, unforgiveness, anger, wounds, and illusions are stored, hiding - and often fully operative...Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control, power, money, pleasure, and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else.”

So what is the fundamental problem we are dealing with here? According to Jesus, Gerald May, and Richard Rohr, we need an intentional process of healing from the illusions of life. One of the ways May and Rohr describe this is our need to heal from addiction. We are created for freedom and love and because of our addictions we often live in bondage and need to be saved by God’s love and grace. Our goal in life is to choose to live in relationship with God and have God be our ultimate focus. All other attachments or aversions will lead us to unhappiness. Gerald May writes (screen), “ultimately, our yearning for God is the most important aspect of our humanity, our most precious treasure...we try to *fulfill our longing for God* through objects of attachment. For example, God wants to be our perfect lover, but instead we seek perfection in human relationships and are disappointed when our lovers cannot love us perfectly. God wants to provide our ultimate security, but we seek our safety in power and possessions and then find we must continually worry about them. We seek satisfaction of our spiritual longing in a host of ways that may have very little to do with God. And, sooner or later, we are disappointed.”

Jesus knew this human struggle very well and challenged his disciples and the whole of society to a different kind of wisdom about life and faith. In the story for today, we hear Jesus challenging the religious leaders about their assumptions. (Read Luke 5:27-32) The religious leaders of his time believed that they were fine and that by following the

rules of religion they had become pure. But if they were really transformed, they would have extended love to others just like God does instead of seeing themselves as superior to others. Table fellowship was an important part of Jesus' ministry and it was a radical kind of event because it always included those who were considered "sinners" by society. Tax collectors at the time were despised because they collaborated with Rome and often fleeced their neighbors. They represented the worst of the corruption and exploitation of that time. Yet, in the kingdom of God as Jesus' presented it, even the worst of us have a chance to be redeemed and to experience freedom. Levi and his table companions represented that great reversal of expectations in the kingdom of God. Levi walked away from a lucrative (we may say today a six-figure) salary to follow Jesus and to help others. It was such a great occasion for celebration that it would not have been surprising that Jesus was celebrating such transformation! We often look at the Pharisees and think of them negatively, but if we are honest with ourselves, we would see that we have a lot more in common with them than with Jesus. They were the folks who followed the rules and teachings of religion. They saw the need to stay away from the "bad" people out there lest they got corrupted by them. They judged people based on their immoral and unethical behaviors. They always found justifications for their behaviors in the Bible or religious teachings. They knew about God's grace but didn't really believe that one could just be loved and free without following the rules of religion. They believed in God but didn't necessarily have a deep personal experience of God's grace in their own hearts.

I love that Jesus did not argue with them about who was a sinner and who was not. He refused to get into that kind of moral argument. Instead, he called them to have mercy and to look at his ministry of healing as the way to fulfill God's will on earth. He came to heal the sick. Who could argue with that? The irony of all of this is that the Pharisees themselves needed to be healed. If we are truly honest with ourselves, all of us are in need of God's grace.

And so today we begin a journey toward healing and wholeness using the intentional process of the Twelve Steps that are usually used by Alcoholics Anonymous to help all of us find the inner freedom and spaciousness that comes from opening ourselves to God's grace. Here are the four assumptions of this journey according to Richard Rohr (screen for headings):

1. **We are all addicts:** This is a challenging one for us because we are often unaware of our inner bondage. If you are struggling with believing this one, try answering the questions listed below (in your bulletin/announcements) by Gerald May and see what you think.

2. **'Stinking Thinking' is the universal addiction.** This is about our patterns of thinking that keep us stuck in pursuing fulfillment through the unholy trinity of power, possessions, and perfect human relationships. Some examples of this kind of thinking are (Screen): Resenting other people, self-centeredness, blaming other people, feeling superior to everyone else, grandiosity, ill-will towards strangers, focus on the faults of other people, viewing the world in black and white, and always attributing negative motives behind the actions of others

3. **All societies are addicted to themselves and create deep codependency on them.** These are shared cultural addictions about power, possessions, and relationships.

**4. Some form of alternative consciousness is the only freedom from this self and from cultural lies.** Often times we are stuck in dualistic win/lose types of patterns of thinking. We need to be healed by God to let a different kind of awareness to emerge. We need the reversal of the gospel of Jesus Christ to challenge and heal us. Just like AA and Richard Rohr say (screen), “We suffer to get well. We surrender to win. We die to live. We give it away to keep it.”

I listened yesterday to a radio interview with Adora Svitak. This is a young woman who at the age of 12 gave a TED talk that went viral because it challenged people’s views about what adults could learn from children: <https://youtu.be/UIZIY20Yga8>.

So this journey may be tough for us but the good news is that it is possible for us to go through this because God is our guide. We are not alone and even though we may experience the pain of letting go of what we have known, we can be sure that the transformation process of God’s grace is well worth the pain. The waters of baptism give us courage that even when we feel like we are going under or drowning, something new is being born in us.

Let us listen to Psalm 23 paraphrased by Nan Merrill as an invitation to us to trust God on this journey:

O my Beloved, you are my shepherd,  
I shall not want;  
You bring me to green pastures for rest  
and lead me beside still waters  
renewing my spirit,  
You restore my soul.  
You lead me in the path of goodness  
to follow Love’s way.  
Even though I walk through the  
valley of the shadow and of death,  
I am not afraid;  
For You are ever with me;  
Your rod and Your staff,  
they guide me,  
they give me strength and comfort.  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of all my fears;  
you bless me with oil,  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy will  
follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the heart  
of the Beloved  
forever. Amen.

### **Some Guidance and Questions by Gerald May's to Help Raise Our Awareness**

Addiction is any compulsive, habitual behavior that limits the freedom of human desire. It is caused by the attachment, or nailing, of desire to specific objects. The word behavior is especially important in this definition, for it indicates that action is essential to addiction. As I have indicated, attachment of desire is the underlying process that results in addictive behavior...As we shall see, the relationship between attachment and addiction is not as simple as it might sound. For one thing, the brain never completely forgets its old attachments, so the absence of conscious desire does not necessarily mean attachment is gone. In fact, because of the tricks our minds play on us, many of our addictions are able to exist for years completely outside our awareness; it is only when our addictions are frustrated or cause us conflict that we have an opportunity to notice how attached we truly are.

Another complicating factor is that behavior is not limited to external physical activity. Thinking is also a behavior, a "doing." Thus images, memories, fantasies, ideas, concepts, and even certain feeling states can become objects of attachment, and one can become fully addicted to them. We have all experienced obsessive thoughts—the tune that repeatedly runs through the mind, the unrealistic worry that refuses to go away. Perhaps we have also recognized that there are certain images of ourselves or concepts about the world that we somehow feel deeply forced to hold on to. Some of us might even admit to having been addicted to certain moods—depression, shyness, cynicism, and the like.

With these additional considerations in mind, it is obvious that still more precision is needed to adequately understand the nature of addiction. We can take a significant step toward precision by exploring five essential characteristics that mark true addiction: (1) tolerance, (2) withdrawal symptoms, (3) self-deception, (4) loss of willpower, and (5) distortion of attention. We can use these five characteristics to determine areas of addiction within our own lives and to distinguish the slavery of addiction from the freedom of true caring.

First, some questions that might reveal tolerance:

- Do I feel that the amount of money and possessions I have right now is sufficient for my security, or do I feel I'd really be better off with more?
- Is my sense of power and control sufficient, or do I feel I need more?
- Are the important people in my life reliable, understanding, and loving enough, or would I feel more secure if they were more so?

Second, some questions about withdrawal symptoms:

- How do I feel if someone or something threatens to take away my possessions, power, or relationships?
- In a typical week, how much time, worry, and energy do I spend trying to hold on to these things?
- If I were to lose one or more of them, how would I feel?
- In the past, when I have suffered such losses, did I experience the stress reaction of withdrawal (anxiety, physical agitation, tremulousness, irritability, and so on)?

- Have I experienced the backlash or rebound reactions of withdrawal (feelings of deep insecurity, an “end-of-the-world” kind of vulnerability)?

Third, some questions about self-deception:

- Do I ever find myself making excuses, denials, or playing other mind tricks to rationalize acquiring more possessions or power or to justify destructive behaviors in relationships?
- Have there been occasions when I’ve wanted to hide some of my possessions from others or to disclaim my power because I really think I have too much?
- Have I sometimes just discovered myself caught up in some security-seeking behavior that I would never have chosen if I’d had my wits about me?
- Have friends or family reflected that they think I’m more attached to some of these things than I myself feel I am?
- Do I sometimes have trouble settling down for quiet reflection, perhaps because I don’t want to confront my own truth about these things?
- Have I ever found myself thinking “I can take it or leave it” or “I can handle it” in relation to possessions, power, or relationships?

Fourth, questions about loss of willpower:

- Have I ever made any resolutions to ease the importance I give to possessions, power, or relationships?
- Have I felt success or failure, pride or defeat with these resolutions, and what were the consequences of those feelings?
- Have I resolved, for example, to contribute more to charity or to be more giving than receiving or to avoid certain kinds of relationships, only to find myself behaving in the same old ways?
- Have I ever gotten to the point with any of these areas where my feelings changed from simple desires to real compulsion, a demanding need that truly seemed out of my control?

Fifth, a question about distortion of attention:

- Where and when do my concerns about possessions, power, or relationships kidnap my attention and eclipse my concern for:
  - My love of God?
  - My love of others?
  - My love of myself?

## **THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.
4. Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all of these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs